
Report to
Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

18th February, 2009

Report of
Councillor David Skinner

Title
Report Back on the Work of Outside Bodies – Whitefriars Housing Group

1 Purpose of the Report

Members nominated by the Council to sit on the boards and committees of outside bodies are required to report back on annually on their work. This report does that with respect to the nominations to the Whitefriars Housing Group. It also gives details of attendance at the organisation's meetings by the Council's nominees.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that the City Council continue to appoint people to serve on the boards and committees of Whitefriars Housing Group.

3 Background

- 3.1 Whitefriars Housing Group Limited is the not-for-profit housing and regeneration organisation established in 2000 at the time of the housing stock transfer, that owns and manages approximately 17,000 homes across Coventry.
- 3.2 Coventry City Council's nominations for 2008/09 are Councillors Adalat, Andrews, Mrs Dixon, Maton, Skinner and Smith and Mr P Lacy.
- 3.3 Whitefriars' vision is – leading the way in delivering success.
- 3.4 Whitefriars' core business aims are:
- Let homes and keep them let
 - Provide homes of a decent quality and standard
 - Develop and maintain the business

and its values that underpin its services and the way it does business are :

- Openness
- Honesty
- Reliability
- Respect
- Innovation
- Empowerment
- Professionalism

- 3.5 Since Whitefriars was formed in 2000 it has invested £232 million of private sector money into Coventry's social housing and its neighbourhoods.
- 3.6 Whitefriars is working with the City Council to promote regeneration of many communities across the city.

4 Whitefriars' Achievements

- 4.1 2008 has been another good year for Whitefriars Housing Group's residents. There have been enhancements in service delivery and new services have been provided. Service quality has been improved and further efficiencies have been achieved.
- 4.2 Working in neighbourhoods, Whitefriars is committed to the national 'iN business for neighbourhoods' agenda and is a major player in the regeneration of Coventry and the provision of affordable housing.
- 4.3 In addition to providing homes, the Group works in partnership with communities and other agencies to provide training and employment opportunities and support services for local residents, with the aim of building sustainable communities.
- 4.3 Whitefriars' 'Stardust Strategy', launched in January 2001, continues to define its culture through its Vision, Values, Core Aims and Objectives. It also represents a framework for change that underpins the delivery of its plans and targets, and the development activity. The performance management framework for employees is at the heart of the Whitefriars Customer Care Policy.
- 4.4 A summary of some of the key activities of Whitefriars during 2008 is:
- a. Children's safety and Education Foundation

Whitefriars worked with Barrs Hill, Ernsford Grange and Caludon Castle Schools. The project was entitled 'Respect your life and choices'. It is a way of Whitefriars getting into schools and begin talking to students about anti-social behaviour.

They worked with students in year 8 (ages 12/13). The main objective was to open the debate about antisocial behaviour, help the students to understand the effect on neighbourhoods and see if any students would be willing to work with them in the future, and therefore increasing their profile within communities.

This project was highly commended as good practice at the Chartered Institute of Housing's good practice awards.

- b. Improvements in Anti-social Behaviour Management

Taking proactive steps to prevent anti-social behaviour and managing any that does arise continues to be a significant focus for Whitefriars. Their work with young people, detailed above, is an example of the innovative approaches that Whitefriars is taking to reduce antisocial behaviour.

At the Torrington Housing Office a new way of working with people experiencing antisocial behaviour is being piloted. The pilot has been running since April 2008. There has been a marked increase in the incidents of antisocial behaviour being reported. Better still, 81% of customers reported satisfaction with the way their call was dealt with and 65% of customers were satisfied with the outcome of their case.

c. Staff Training

During 2007/08 Whitefriars won a Partnership and Collaboration award in the National Training Awards for sickness absence training. They also won a Chartered Institute of Housing Best Practice Award for Organisational Commitment to Personal Development for their apprenticeship scheme, which again received an Approved Apprentice Employer Award. They had a finalist in the Freeman's Guild Apprentice of the Year Awards and employed the winner of the Freeman's Guild Special Endeavour Award.

d. Building new homes

Whitefriars has continued to implement its development strategy. In partnership with the City Council it has provided 95 new homes for Coventry in the past year. This includes the development of shared ownership homes at 'Bannerbrook' that gives people the opportunity to get an affordable first step on the housing ladder.

e. Repairs and Maintenance

Whitefriars has invested a further £12.4m in additional upgrades its stock. A major scheme this year has delivered external improvement works to the high-rise blocks adjacent to the new City College in Swanswell. This was done in consultation with customers and capped off with a 'community evening' in December to celebrate completion. The blocks have been given a modern look that successfully complements the new City College buildings.

Whitefriars has also delivered a further 650 kitchen and bathroom upgrades and 1,000 new heating systems.

Over the last 12 months, Whitefriars has delivered significant improvements to its repairs service and achieved improved customer satisfaction. A significant factor in this was the introduction of new hand-held technology for HomeWorks' craft-workers delivering responsive repairs. Because of the instant notification of job completion by the worker through the handheld customer, satisfaction surveys can be taken within two hours of the job being done. This means any problems are sorted quickly and with minimum inconvenience to the customer. The surveys indicate that 98% of customers are happy with the conduct of the worker and 96% with the finished job. Repair appointment reminders by text message were also introduced. This provides customers with a reminder the day before the appointment is due. It has proved extremely popular and successfully reduced abortive visits.

A new vehicle fleet was introduced across HomeWorks to maintain service reliability and reduce fuel consumption and carbon emissions. From March 2009 revised repair reporting arrangements designed to ensure Whitefriars give customers a better service at the point of repair-order will be introduced. This will include the ability for customers to raise repairs through Whitefriars' website.

f. Financial Inclusion

Whitefriars had been pro-active in addressing the 'financial inclusion' of its tenants prior to the current economic downturn. However, the economic downturn makes this even more important. Whitefriars' financial inclusion activities to support some of Coventry's most deprived residents include:

- Partnership working across the City with a wide range of agencies to ensure access to money, welfare benefit and debt advice.
- Appointment of dedicated specialist debt advisor in January 2009
- Community Support Fund established in January 2009 to help residents with genuine hardship.
- Successful bid with the Department of Work and Pensions for 'Big Lottery' funding for a 'Homekeep Worker', based at Willenhall Money Advice Centre.
- Work with Credit Unions across the City to promote their services, encouraging residents to join and begin saving, steering them away from high interest doorstep lending.
- Work with Chartered Institute of Housing in development of its Financial Inclusion Strategy.

g. Environmental enhancements

Within the limited funding available, Whitefriars has worked to improve its estates. In a number of areas Whitefriars has land that would generally be classed as "public realm". Some of these areas are located where all or most of the housing is now in private ownership.

In addition to its routine environmental maintenance and enhancement work, Whitefriars has:

Introduced cleaning services to low rise blocks across the city. These are offered to Whitefriars' customers. A major source of dissatisfaction within communities is the appearance of communal areas and the surroundings to these flats. They represent a significant proportion of Whitefriars' stock. Whitefriars believes that offering these services, in consultation with customers, will have a major positive impact on the way its estates are perceived by all residents.

Introduced arrangements where-by estate and block inspections are undertaken and signed off by all residents. A recent survey achieved high levels of satisfaction with estate services.

Appointed an officer to work in the 'Your Neighbourhood Matters' program delivering projects in Coventry's six most deprived neighbourhoods.

With the 'West Midlands Fire Service' and 'Groundwork Coventry and Warwickshire', worked together on the 'Keep it Clean, Make it Safe' environmental project, funded through the 'Your Neighbourhood Matters' project. The aim of the project is to raise awareness on fire safety within the home and highlight the link between incorrect methods of rubbish disposal within the home and the surrounding environment, that may cause fire.

5 Whitefriars' Future

- 5.1 A very important development with regard to the future of Whitefriars was its merger with the West Mercia Housing Group, on 1st December. This gives Whitefriars access to Social Housing Grant from the Homes and Community Agency. It puts it in a strong position to take advantage of development opportunities that exist and that will be particularly significant during the housing market downturn. It will be able to take a leading role in providing new, affordable homes in Coventry.

6 Benefits to the City Council of the Appointments

- 6.1 Coventry City Council gains a clear understanding of the social housing environment and social housing provision in Coventry. Nominations of the Council on the Board and Committees of Whitefriars aids communication between both organisations. Whitefriars houses almost 1 in 5 of Coventry's population and their residents are often amongst the most deprived in the community. The Council appointees on Whitefriars Board help ensure that tenants receive high-quality value for money service.
- 6.2 I have the following comments to add:
- a) I am constantly struck by the ongoing need for high-quality housing in Coventry.
 - b) I recognise the need for close and efficient working relationships between Whitefriars and relevant Council staff.
 - c) I am greatly impressed with the work of Mr Peter Lacy and other Members of the Board. They care, and I am proud to be associated with them.
 - d) I attended the main meetings between Whitefriars and the West Mercia Boards and did my best to understand the technical, legal and financial aspects of the merger. I believe that the merger will be of long-term benefit to residents in Coventry.

7 Attendance Record and Remuneration

7.1 Attendance Record

During the period December 2007 and November 2008 there were seven meetings of the Board of Directors of Whitefriars Housing Group. Out of seven possible meetings, Peter Lacy and David Skinner each attended six; Kevin Maton five; David Smith four; and Susanna Dixon one out of a possible three (before leaving the Board of Directors). Allan Andrews, being appointed halfway through the year, attended two of a possible four. Altaf Adalat attended no meetings.

Four meetings of the Whitefriars' Finance Committee were held. This Committee has two council nominees sitting on it; Altaf Adalat and David Smith. David Smith attended all four meetings. Altaf Adalat attended no meetings.

Four meetings of the Whitefriars' Property & Investment Committee were held. This Committee has three council nominees sitting on it; Allan Andrews, Kevin Maton and David Smith. Out of four possible meetings, David Smith attended two and Kevin Maton attended none. Allan Andrews, being appointed halfway through the year, attended one of a possible two.

Four meetings of the Whitefriars' Housing Operations Committee were held. This Committee has one council nominee sitting on it, David Skinner. He attended two of the four meetings.

Three meetings of the Whitefriars' Human Resources Committee were held. This Committee has two council nominees sitting on it; Susanna Dixon, who was succeeded by Allan Andrews, and Peter Lacy. Peter Lacy attended all three meetings. Allan Andrews attended

the one meeting he was eligible for. Susanna Dixon did not attend the meeting she was eligible for.

7.2 Remuneration

Only the Chair of Whitefriars and the Chair of their Committees are remunerated. This only applies to Mr P Lacy. His re-numeration is £10,000 per annum.

List of background papers

Author:

Cllr David Skinner

(Any enquiries should be directed to the above)

Telephone 7683 3156

Other contributors:

Richard Monk, Whitefriars Housing Group

Stephen Rudge, Housing Policy and Services.

Papers open to Public Inspection

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Schedule of City Council Appointments to Outside Bodies